# Politicians and Political Leaders in Solomon Islands

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## Context

The personalisation of politics, where leaders matter more than parties or ideologies, is a key theme in the extant commentary and academic analysis on politics in Solomon Islands (Steeves 1996) and more generally in the literature about government in small island developing states (Baldacchino 2012). The background characteristics of political leaders is also of growing interest to scholars concerned with the capacity of 'developmental' leadership to affect pro-poor change (Leftwich 2010), and related 'mapping leadership' projects in the Pacific region (Corbett 2012; Hanson & Oliver 2010). And yet, despite the orthodoxy of labels like personalisation, and the interest generated by research bodies like the Developmental Leadership Program, we know very little about the people who get into parliament — who they are and how they chart a pathway to power.

This briefing note summarises some findings from research undertaken into the pre-political backgrounds of members of parliament (MPs) in Solomon Islands. (Research covered in more depth in Corbett and Wood 2013.) By combining quantitative biographical information about more than 80% of post-independence MPs, and more than 30 in-depth qualitative interviews with past and present politicians, we develop a picture of the average Solomon Islands MP. In doing so, we identify patterns relating to age, education and occupation and chart how they have changed since independence.

## Findings

***Politicians in Solomon Islands, on average, are getting older.*** The median age of politicians in 1976 was 36; by 2006 it was 50. Two factors explain this increase: 1) the colonial rule left only a select cadre of young educated leaders at independence; and 2) the rising influence of money politics privileges older and more experienced candidates capable of generating the resources needed to win election.

***Despite much 'talk' about the need for better qualified leaders, politicians already have education backgrounds far higher than the average Solomon Islander.*** Since independence, around 85 per cent of MPs have had some secondary schooling (compared with 2009 census data which shows that only 24.3 per cent of the Solomons population have attended secondary school). Moreover, education levels are rising with roughly 90 per cent of MPs in the 2001 parliament having undertaken academic tertiary study. This figure has dropped slightly since then but it remains significantly higher than the figure at independence (around 50 per cent) and substantially greater than the 4.4 per cent of Solomon Islanders who, according to the 2009 census, have undertaken tertiary study. Largely, these tertiary qualifications have been obtained in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.

***The civil service has historically been the most common career pathway into politics for MPs, but this trend is changing with business people in particular increasingly entering parliament.*** Prior to 2001, roughly 70 per cent of MPs had worked in the civil service at some stage of their career — it remains at about 50 per cent in 2010. Similarly, the proportion of MPs with a background in provincial government, teaching and the clergy has declined. In contrast, the proportion of those with private sector experience has risen from around 20 per cent in 1980 to over 40 per cent in 2010.

***Despite being in possession of attributes that set them apart from their constituents, politicians in Solomon Islands remain embedded within a plurality of networks and relationships that link them in multiple ways to voters and the communities they represent.*** While quantitative data provides a broad picture of how the makeup of Solomon Islands parliament has changed since independence, interviews highlight that overt distinctions between leadership types (political, business, religious etc.) are problematic. As Corbett (2012) highlights,

MPs in the Pacific tend to have overlapping identities and undertake multiple roles, with most simultaneously active in numerous 'spheres'.

## Significance

Together, these trends reveal that politicians in Solomon Islands are more qualified and experienced than they were at independence, while the legislature has an increasingly diverse range of skills and occupational backgrounds which should, in theory, provide for more robust decision-making. Perversely, the quality of governance, as measured by international benchmarks, has declined. Indeed, the most educated, experienced and diverse parliament was 2001 — a year synonymous with the commencement of the conflict commonly called the 'Tensions'.

These findings have several implications. They appear to be at odds with the 'developmental' leadership literature and the belief that leader capacity is an important variable in achieving developmental outcomes. In particular, initial research in Africa has correlated rising levels of leader education with improved governance outcomes (Theron 2012). Within the aid and development sphere, a similar elite capacity argument has been advanced by Francis Fukuyama (2008), contracted by the Australian Government aid programme to advise on state building in Solomon Islands, who recommended that donors fund elite schools to train a generation of nation-builders.

Our findings also suggest that despite being in possession of attributes that set them apart from their constituents, politicians in Solomon Islands remain embedded within a plurality of networks and relationships. They are perhaps best described as conduits who exert influence via numerous institutions — families, communities, churches, business, provincial and national government — that link them in multiple ways to voters and the constituencies they represent. From this perspective, questions about governance become less about leaders and more about the nature of the social contract, and the governmental aims that citizens and their representatives seek to pursue.

## References


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